
A Feast of Remembrance

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"Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ,
the holy supper which we are about to celebrate
is a feast of remembrance, of communion, and of hope.
We come in remembrance . . ."
("The Order for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper,"
RCA Liturgy and Psalms, 65)

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Holidays and special events around the world, both secular and religious, are feasts of remembrance. They remind celebrants to rejoice, to give thanks, to be renewed, to begin again, to honor and emulate former heroes, to rededicate life and living, or to stop and regain perspective. New Year's Day is a feast of remembrance as we let go of the past and resolve to be and do better in the new year. A new millennium offers increased incentive for change, and hope for a bright future emerging from the past. For many households it is a time to sort the clutter of the past and keep only what is needful.

Stacked before me, shortly after New Year's Day 2000, is my private feast of remembrance to sort through, to pitch, to dust, to reorganize, and to repack. These are boxes of my memorabilia from the past forty years. This feat requires several days to accomplish as each item is savored, memories are renewed, and smiles, laughter, and tears accompany deeper appreciation. Rarely is anything discarded. I hold, in turn, a baptismal certificate, a baby book, report cards, class pictures, grade school art work, autograph books, field day ribbons, first valentines, diplomas and tassels, summer camp name tags, friends' wedding photos, last letters from grandparents tucked inside their memorial service bulletins, notes from siblings during teen crises, journals from foreign travels, wonderings, collages, a POW bracelet, pre-wedding correspondence, news clippings, cute sayings of my own children, and more photos. What a feast of remembrance! These precious boxes, together with my mind and heart, hold my memories and remind me of who I am, from where I have come, and to whom I belong. What a tragedy it would be to lose these priceless gifts of memory, to be unable any longer to savor the richness of this feast.

It is precisely this tragedy that has invaded my mother's life. Like a moth in the closet, Alzheimer's disease has been at work in her memory box; consuming, destroying, discarding precious segments of her life, leaving behind only bits and pieces of memories. Annual feasts that draw our family religiously back together around the table have become marred by sorrow, as that ritual of

reminiscing now accentuates the degree of Mom's memory loss. Remembering the bygone family days turns painful as her recall becomes elusive, as if the past never occurred. Physical pieces of her memorabilia and furniture now reside in her children's homes. The sight of them, however, evokes little recollection for her. The past is not only over, it is nearly gone. "Some days I'm not sure who I am, or where I am. Sometimes I am so scared," were her words earlier this year. At times, our memories serve as both compass and anchor. Without memory we are adrift in a sea of uncertainty, confusion, and fear. Remembering is surely a precious and priceless gift of grace.

"Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray," goes the proverb (Prov. 22:6), and it proved true for my mother and prayer. She was trained in prayer. While many things from her past have diminished, her ability to pray amazes the listener. I remember Mom and Dad on their knees nightly, praying for their children. While the specifics of day-to-day routine flee from her memory and special days and events no longer hold much meaning, that daily prayer time remains powerful, sincere, meaningful, trusting, faith-filled, and coherent, an act of ministry to others and an act of worship to God. As a result of her early training, Mom is not hesitant to offer prayer. She thanks God each morning for wisdom and for patience. She offers thanks for her husband and his goodness, and she prays that her children and grandchildren may know and love God. What a feast of remembrance it is to hear those faith-filled prayers. For her it seems enough to be able to pray, and so it should be for us all. Yet we whose memories still endure, long for her feast of remembrance to embrace the present realities of daily life, the specifics that fill each day.

That longing becomes especially intense when we move from prayer to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What are we to do when we come to the Christian feast of remembrance, and can no longer remember it? Is it enough to have been trained in the words of the liturgy, to have by rote the language of faith? What if, gathering at the feast, we forget why we have come? What happens when God's people cannot remember the mighty acts of God so vividly rehearsed in the feast of remembrance? What happens emotionally, relationally, spiritually when the gift of remembering is beyond recovery? Do we lose faith? When, with these questions in my heart, I am called to give voice to the *Liturgy's* words, "We come in remembrance . . .," I feel my throat thicken, and my vision becomes blurred by tears.

The Book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Scriptures is entirely devoted to encouraging God's people to remember whose they are and what they are called to be and do. The act of *remembering* empowered God's people to live well and to live faithfully (Deut. 8). The remembrance of the Sabbath was rooted in Israel's memory of slavery. Sabbath-keeping recalled a new freedom to be celebrated and remembered (Deut. 5:15). "Remember the days of old, consider the years long past . . ." (Deut. 32:7).

The annual celebration of the Festival of Unleavened Bread was one of the Hebrew feasts of remembrance. It remembered the Passover act of God in their

behalf in Egypt. "Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt . . . It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips . . .'" (Exod. 13:3, 9).

Every celebration, every high holy day, that emerges from the Scriptures and the Judeo-Christian tradition is a feast of remembrance, recalling what God has done and continues to do. As psalmists, sages, and prophets, rebuilders of ruins and restorers of life and hope set down their songs, their wisdom, and their prophetic words, they tell of our need to remember:

"Remember the wonderful works he has done," is the refrain of 1 Chronicles 16:8-13; and Psalm 105:1-5.

"I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands" (Ps. 143:5).

"Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, . . ." (Eccles. 12:1).

"Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me" (Isa. 44:21).

"Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel" (Mal. 4:4).

"Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, . . ." (Neh. 4:14b).

"Remember whence you came. . ." (4 Macc. 13:12b).

"Remember how he told you . . . Then they remembered his words" (Luke 24:6,8).

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20b).

"Remember then what you received and heard. . ." (Rev. 3:3).

If the sacraments are signs of God's grace, then the gift of remembering is surely both gracious and sacramental. Remembrance is the precious gift our hearts and minds hold in the present, while what is recalled resides in the past. The gift of remembrance enables the experience of the past to be shared in the present moment. Memories remind us from whence we have come, who we are, and whose we are. They help us know that our present is grounded in the past, and they give us footing for the future. When we obey God's command to remember, we participate in the liturgy, the work of the people, and we recall God's grace toward us. "We come in remembrance. . ." Yet, some come with

memories severely diminished or completely lost, due not to their desire, but to their disease.

Into the very depth of this heartrending circumstance, God speaks words of comfort and hope. God says, in effect, that when the gift of remembering is lost, whether we know it or not, we still have the gift of *being remembered*. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" (Isa. 49:15a). When I was a young mother myself, I thought the answer was obviously and emphatically, "No, of course not. My mother will never forget me!" But now I recognize what I should have known all along. God is even more familiar with Alzheimer's than I. "Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isa. 49:15b). God remembers us even when we cannot remember God. God remembered Noah and the animals (Gen. 8:1). God remembers the covenant with the earth each time rainbows appear (Gen. 9:15, 16). God remembers both obedience and disobedience (Lev. 26:42, 45). God "remembered us in our low estate" (Ps. 136:23), helping God's people "in remembrance of his mercy" (Luke 1:54). God shows the "mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant" (Luke 1:72). God remembers.

Of course, Scripture also tells us of the things God will not remember, and of the "former things" that we are to forget (Isa. 43:18, 19, 25). Yet to *be remembered* by God is perhaps a greater gift of grace than our ability to remember. A few months ago, I visited Edna, the oldest member of the Covenant Community Church in Muskegon, Michigan, who was celebrating her hundredth birthday. Only in the last few years has she been unable to attend worship. Because her garden was always the best in the neighborhood, I brought her a gift of a flowering plant. A few days later, her daughter told me how amazed and grateful Edna was that she had been remembered and not forgotten. The gift of being remembered is more precious than any of us know.

"Do you remember me?" Rachel asked me one day when I visited my mother in the Alzheimer's unit. "No," I had to respond, "I don't remember you, Rachel, but I know you as my mother's neighbor now." "Oh," she said, "so you do know me then." When we no longer know ourselves or remember from where we have come, to *be remembered* and known is a gift of grace. Even if someday we forget who we are, God does not forget us. So also, we, like God, must remember one another on behalf of one another.

Remembering is not solely an individual act. Our family's corporate memory reminds my mother who she is. The Christian community gathered together can remember even on behalf of those whose own memory is lost and thus remind them of who they are. That is the beauty of family history, of a shared community of faith, and of all human relationships. Corporate memory is a powerful reality for our baptized infants, for our mentally impaired members, and for our teenagers who, like the Alzheimer's victims, often cannot seem to remember who they are, whose they are, or to what they are called. As family and as community, we recall and retell the stories that shape us and ground us.

When the storytellers lose their memories, those gathered to recite the story on their behalf enable them to continue to share in the celebration of the feasts of remembrance. We tell our little ones who they are. We remind our teenagers to whom both they and we belong, for we are not our own, but are interdependent on one another. We do not allow anyone to forget the stories that led us to where we are. We come *together* in remembrance.

Mom has not forgotten how to pray, but has nearly lost all meaningful recollection of the communion liturgy. Now, breaking bread and sharing a cup of soup with her from the local takeout restaurant has become a feast of remembrance. A shared prayer, holding hands, giving thanks, expressing love, and reading correspondence from loved ones remembering and praying for her, is a celebration of communion. Her kitchen table, transplanted to an Alzheimer's facility, covered by a stained linen cloth set with fresh flowers, family photos, and her Bible, has become the Table of our Lord. It serves as a holy place for a holy meal where Christ is present and grace abounds. From that ordinary table is served a feast of remembrance, of communion, and of hope.

Thank you, loving God, for the gift of memories,
for the way they shape us and hold us.
Help us remember who we are, to whom we belong,
and what we are called to be and to do.
When we can no longer remember any of these things,
grace us with those who can remind us.
And thank you, faithful God,
for never forgetting us. Amen.

March 2000

Mom died unexpectedly March 3, 2000, just three months after Dad's sudden death. Both deaths were heart related. Mom never forgot God's gift of the love she shared with Dad. She never forgot her faith, or how to pray. I am grateful that her memory loss never prevented her from recognizing her family and close friends. We were always able to prompt some reflection on the past and to laugh about funny stories. But mostly, for her and all Alzheimer's victims, the present moment was all there was and generally all that mattered. Day to day the past was basically lost, and the future beyond comprehension. Yet, to share life and love, sunshine and birdsong, a milkshake, a hug, and a prayer constituted a feast of remembrance.